

## WINTER



In the winter, the wolf pack spends a great deal of time on the move. By now, the pups are as large as their parents and older siblings, although like human adolescents, they will continue to gain weight and to “fill out” as they approach the end of their first year. Although severe winters can seriously compromise the survival of a wolf pack, winter is often a time of relative ease for wolves. Hunting and finding food is always difficult, but in winter, the wolves are not confined to the area of the den or the rendezvous site, and they are not preoccupied with feeding the fast-growing pups.

Wolves are marvelously adapted for travel and for cold weather. Long slim legs enable the wolf to travel tirelessly, often as much as twenty miles or more a day. Big feet with flexible toes that grasp and cling to rocks distribute the wolf’s weight on snow and mud. Narrow chests act like snowplows in deep drifts. Long guard hairs protect a layer of downy underfur, keeping the wolf warm in the coldest of weather.

Because **red** wolves hunt smaller prey than gray wolves, some biologists concluded that perhaps they were more solitary, living and traveling singly or in pairs. Research shows, however, that red wolves often stay together in families in the winter traveling in packs consisting of the alpha pair, the pups of the current year, and often the offspring of the previous year. The pack lives mainly mammals such as white-tailed deer, raccoons, rabbits, and rodents.

Young adult wolves who leave the pack in search of new territories and a mate are called dispersers. These dispersers often spend the winter in search of a wolf of the opposite sex so that they can begin a new family in an unoccupied territory.



Usually only the alpha male and the alpha female of a pack mate and produce pups. Wolves have been observed to mate for life, but this is not a hard and fast rule. When one of the alpha pair dies or has its status challenged, it may be replaced. The alpha pair will spend a month or more in winter bonding with one another. Mating occurs only once a year, usually in February or March. Before giving birth, the mother wolf chooses a den site that is near a good supply of food and water. Although a den may be a niche among some rocks for a hollow under a log, usually the mother digs a den.

## VOCABULARY

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|----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1. adapted     | 3. underfur   | 5. mammal    | 7. alpha male   |
| 2. guard hairs | 4. alpha pair | 6. disperser | 8. alpha female |